

# Why Wilderness Films Are Wildly Popular

Vincent Canby

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The most passionately political films being made in this country today have nothing to do with government scandals or cover-ups by highly placed public officials who goofed. They contain no references to Watergate, Mao, détente, the CIA, Fanne Fox or even the Bicentennial. They make no pleas on behalf of the underprivileged. They certainly aren't revolutionary threats from some underfed underground cooperative. Instead they are what the writers of irate letters to movie critics call "pure" entertainment, which is usually a euphemism for mindless. They haven't the slightest interest in current affairs or social problems, or, at least, none that shows. They are totally devoid of sex and the only violence shown is nature's way. Apparently because of these things, they are films that parents by the carloads are dragging their children off to see in the fond belief that innocence is being simultaneously protected and served.

I'm talking about the new "wilderness" movies with titles such as "Brother of The Wind," "The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams," "The Adventures of the Wilderness Family," "Challenge to Be Free" and "The Bears and I," all except the last (a Walt Disney production) having been financed and distributed outside the auspices of the major Hollywood companies. The films began appearing a year or so ago as a trickle. The trickle has now become a clearly defined wave that would, if I read the films correctly, carry us back to the glorious 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a man could be free to live life as he saw fit, when women, blacks, Indians and new arrivals with strange accents knew their places, when there was no pollution, when government was small and taxes even smaller, when all it took to get ahead was faith in God and a willingness to work.

To see one of these films is, perhaps, to enjoy a harmless adventure. To see two of them is to begin to recognize a mode of operation. To see three is to understand that a seemingly sentimental longing for old-fashioned values is, on the other side, a furious cry of frustration and rage with political change, especially with a society that questions the morality of the-survival-of-the-fittest as a national policy. When you come out of one of these films, you're likely to think the country started going downhill the day the Federal Government took over the mails. The "wilderness" films not only glorify private enterprise as individual effort; they endow it with mythic powers.

Here are some of the so-called plots:

In "Brother of The Wind," a hardy old man, in remarkably fine shape for his years, has turned his back on civilization to live as a hermit in the wilds of the Canadian Rockies. Most of the film is devoted to his raising four orphaned wolf puppies who, when they are fully grown and out on their own, are more slavishly grateful to the old man than any human children would be.

"The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams" is about another loner, a man who, when falsely accused of a crime, abandons his small, motherless daughter and strikes out for the wilderness where he learns he can communicate with animals more meaningfully than with people. This fellow raises an orphaned grizzly bear cub. When, years later, his name is cleared, the man elects to stay in the wilderness where the animals are his friends and look up to him, much as if the wilderness had become his private plantation.

“The Adventures of The Wilderness Family” is one the few such films to acknowledge that its theme is escape from contemporary society. It’s about the members **Continued on Page 15** of a family who attempt to pioneer today in the Pacific Northwest where they are befriended by some of the fauna (black bears, raccoons) and set upon by others (grizzly bears, a pack of wolves). A Westchester reader has told me that her children were scared out of their wits by one of the animal fights in the film. Though this is a pretty feeble movie, it’s the only one of the five to feature a complete family unit (mother, father, two children). They may be as anti-social as the heroes of the other films, but they are anti-social together.

“Challenge To Be Free,” directed by the 77-year-old Hollywood filmmaker Tay Garnett (“China Seas,” “The Postman Always Rings Twice”), stars Mike Mazurki as a legendary Alaskan character named Trapper, a hermit who exists happily in his mountain cabin in the enriching society of wolves, bears, moose, elk, rams and a live-in lynx. When corrupt civilization intrudes in the persons of some law officers, Trapper accidentally shoots one to death, which triggers a cross-Alaska chase in which Trapper is repeatedly saved by a faithful old timber wolf, whose life had earlier been ‘saved by Trapper. In the pious (and cost-cutting) voice-over narration that is used in most of these films, we are told, “Circumstances had placed a real friendship between them (Trapper and the wolf), the kind only understood those born to stay free.”

Disney’s “The Bears and I,” the one wilderness film that looks as if it cost more than \$5 in out-of-pocket expenses, is about a Vietnam vet, Patrick Wayne (John’s son), who goes into the Rockies to live alone and find himself, which he does while raising three orphaned bear cubs. (After seeing almost two of these films, one begins to wonder how wilderness animals survive without saintly hermits to raise the homeless young.) This is also the only wilderness film to acknowledge that there may be some point in social order when the Vietnam vet settles a territorial dispute between some local Indians and the head of the Parks Commission.

Any one of these films seen separately might seem innocent enough, but seen altogether they begin to shape up as propaganda, carefully calculated to give the public the kind of escapism it wants, while calling for a return to the old laissez-faire economy where a man was free to be as ipaternal as he wanted to people (animals) less fortunate than himself. The true rigors of wilderness existence are never emphasized, while the joys of man-beast relationships are rather overstated.

In an article in the Village Voice Feb. 23, J. Hoberman reported at some length on the elaborate methods employed by Sun Classic Pictures, described as “a part of the right-wing Schick conglomerate” and the producers of “Grizzly Adams” and “Brother of The Wind,” to research the market before putting any of its films into release. I would suspect that much more money is spent in hard-sell promotion of these films than is ever spent in making them. There is nothing wrong in that except that the films are so technically tacky one would wish a little more had been spent on production. It just may be, however, that the patrons who turned “Grizzly Adams” into one of the biggest box-office hits last year may have been brainwashed by market research

without knowing it. I wonder, too, if they realize that the films' romantic notions about wilderness life are actually the fantasies of people with a very particular political message to., sell. Political liberals, so often credited as running Hollywood, seldom get their messages across so loud and clear—and so profitably.

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